

Fantastic Feasts and Where to Find Them

A Sermon Expositing John 21:1-19

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Well, are we really living in an Easter world or not!?

Obviously, we are still in the Easter season and so liturgically speaking we are celebrating Easter, but I mean out there, in the world, are we really living into what it means for Christ to be risen among us? My question relies of course on the recognition that the resurrection of Christ wasn't simply about a dead man getting up and walking again, but about the power of God transcending the powers of empire, the powers of evil, even the power of death. That of course means that the proclamation of Easter isn't about a thing that happened a long time ago, but about a thing that is happening right now – namely that God is at work redeeming the world. We know all that, but are we *really* living in that world? What would it look like? And how should we participate in it?

From one vantage our scripture reading this morning has a grim answer for us as it paints a picture for us of what the immediate post-Easter world looked like for some of Jesus's disciples. There they were some time after the dramatic events that unfolded in Jerusalem - having experienced the traumatizing lows of their teacher being arrested, convicted, and executed on bogus charges brought by men afraid to lose their power *and* having experienced the dizzying highs of meeting that same teacher in bodily form beyond the grave – there they were just fishing away. Well, can you call it fishing if you're not actually catching fish? There they were tossing nets again and again when some guy on the shore called out to them and told them to try the other side of the boat. Who knows if they were just appeasing him or if it seemed a genuinely helpful suggestion, but the result is nothing short of miraculous! So many fish are bound up in the net that the writer makes a special point to tell us that the net didn't break, as if we should have expected it *to* break under the strain of so many fish.

It was such a huge, miraculous moment that one of the disciples immediately recognized the source of it. The man on the shore was the resurrected Jesus! On being told that, Peter recognizes this is no longer a mundane moment, but a miraculous one and he is in the company of the risen Christ. He'd better put his clothes back on! I guess we know now why they were fishing at night – that Israeli sun can be harsh while fishing naked! Now clothed, Peter jumps in the water so as not to wait another moment to be at Jesus's side and swims ashore while his fishing buddies haul in the catch. Together they all dine on freshly caught fish. The post Easter world is simply miraculous!

It's a wonderful scene, but foreboding for us – that is unless any of your naked fishing ventures have yielded a miraculous catch lately. Or barring that, *any* of your ventures have gone miraculously well. I don't know about you, but after two years of pandemic I'm just trying elevate my expectations of life experiences from “mediocre at best,” to “ok I guess.” Nothing about the world we're living in feels particularly miraculous to me – not the fishing, not the on again off again pandemic, not the political realities, not the fear and anger and vitriol that seeps into everything. If living in an Easter world is supposed to feel miraculous, I'm not sure we're in one.

Either that or our experience of the world is a bit more like the No-Majs.

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

You know of the No-Majs, don't you? From JK Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*? It is a story, not unlike our gospel reading this morning, about two worlds clashing. Except where our gospel story is about the post-Easter world breaking in to the mundane pre-Easter world, *Fantastic Beasts* is about the magical world of wizards breaking into the world of the No-Majs, that is folks who possess no magical powers, non wizards. Newt Scamander is a wizard with an affinity for magical creatures who is stopping over in New York City at the end of a worldwide trip to study and document these so called "Fantastic Beasts." The central theme at play in the story is the way that humanity lets difference create suspicion and suspicion create animosity and animosity create oppression and violence. Wizards, in the story, are not allowed to use their powers for fear of being found out as wizards and therefore subject to punishment by the fearful No-Maj government. The tension between the two worlds is given a real-world feel by incorporating images, symbols, and characters that draw a striking resemblance to oppressive, authoritarian regimes of history. Those thinly veiled allusions to oppression past are also thinly veiled allusions to oppression present.

This central theme of hate vs love, fear vs connection, oppression vs inclusion plays out in the midst of several creatures escaping a magical suitcase Newt was carrying and a furious effort to recapture them before they are discovered, do irreparable damage to the city or harm to its inhabitants, or simply generate further suspicion and animosity toward the wizarding world. The recapture of the creatures involves the use of magical musk, epic chases through the city, elaborate mating dances, demolishing the store room of a department store, breaking into jewelry stores...and other doubtlessly eye-catching events. Here's the amazing part. The capture of these creatures, which also serves to restore security for the oppressed wizarding world and reestablish peace in the city, take place throughout crowded New York City in truly epic moments and yet the No-Majs are none the wiser. Thanks in some cases to magic that allows activities to go unnoticed and in other cases magic that *obliviates* or erases select memories, the No-Majs are completely *oblivious* to the restorative work happening around them.

In fact, one of the No-Majs, Jakob Kowalski, is along for the entire ride, shocked at every turn by what he's witnessing as the creatures are gathered up. He even ends up *helping* capture some of the creatures unwittingly simply because he has a kind and willing disposition. It is an absolutely fanciful story and if you haven't read it or seen it, I recommend it, it's great fun! It also provides an unsuspecting point of interpretation for our gospel story today. What if the experience of the No-Majs in *Fantastic Beasts* is the same as our experience of the post-Easter world? What if all the drama and epic action and *miraculous-ness* of resurrection is taking place outside of our notice, but taking place all the same. What if our role in the story of resurrection isn't that of Newt, scurrying around the city and magically arresting fantastic beasts, but rather that of Jacob, vaguely aware that something redemptive is happening, willing to help, but not needing to (or be capable of) controlling it all.

In another way of looking at it, our gospel story kind of points to that. Yes, the miraculous is present in the story, but notice one critical detail. The epic part of the Easter story in John's gospel is over before this story begins. Jesus has already been condemned and died in Jerusalem, he's already risen from the tomb, he's already appeared to all the disciples, already made a believer of Thomas, and the gospel writer has even wrapped the whole gospel up with what feels like a closing statement, "[All] these signs are written so that you may come to believe...and that through believing you may have life in his name." That's it, the gospel has ended with a summary after the dramatic events in Jerusalem. Except then there's one more story after that.

Our gospel story for this morning is the bonus scene at the end of the movie only it isn't in Jerusalem. The disciples have returned to the sea of Galilee. They've gone home and resumed doing what they do – naked fishing. If we read the gospel in full, our eye isn't drawn to the epic and the miraculous in this story. We've gotten used to that back in Jerusalem. If we read straight through our eye is caught by the mundane – they're fishing! In Galilee! Yes, something miraculous happens, yes, the resurrected Christ makes another appearance, but the focal point is that the miraculous is unfolding amid the mundane.

What if that's the way the post-Easter world is unfolding? In the realms unseen there is big, dramatic, redemptive, world re-ordering stuff happening. The skies are breaking open, injustice is being defeated, love is

winning the day, but we're just here. Here we are just doing our best to be kind, to stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves, gathering in inclusive community, and just trying to live in the way of Jesus as best we can. If that's true, if the full and miraculous work of redemption is God's alone and our role is just to live our mundane lives as selflessly and redemptively as we can then participating in resurrection looks differently than we might have expected it. We participate in resurrection every morning in the same way Peter did: we get dressed, have some breakfast, and get out there.

Amen.